# the ROHMER REVIEW

No. 5

# *Fleet Street Report*

by Andrew Jay Peck
and the Editor

Those SRS members and other Rohmer enthusiasts who were lucky enough to attend the "Night with Fu Manchu" sponsored by the Armchair Detective Cinema in New York (run by our media editor, Chris Steinbrunner) on April 25, 1970, were treated to an evening of fine entertainment. We saw THE MASK OF FU MANCHU, THE VENGEANCE OF FU MANCHU, chapter one of THE DRUMS OF FU MANCHU, and heard tapes of several episodes of the 1930s Fu Manchu radio serial (copies of which were offered by Chris in TRR #3, and which are still available from him). Here are some excerpts from the program notes written by Chris Steinbrunner:

"THE VENGEANCE OF FU MANCHU - with Glen Gordon (Fu Manchu), Lester Matthews (Nayland Smith), Clark Howat (Petrie)... The seventh of thirteen episodes of Republic's TV series on the Rohmer character, this half-hour featured a chubby, less vital Fu...

"THE MASK OF FU MANCHU - with Boris Karloff (Fu Manchu), Lewis Stone (Nayland Smith), Myrna Loy (Fah Lo Suee)... The accent is all on Boris Karloff in his most vocal role to date. And how well he does it! A somewhat bright and stylish MGM film for 1932, MASK still chills and horrifies with its fantastic tortures and venoms, wielded with zeal and panache by Fu and his daughter...

"THE DRUMS OF FU MANCHU/Chapter One: Fu Manchu Strikes! - with Henry Brandon (Fu Manchu), William Royle (Smith), Gloria Franklin (Fah Lo Suee)... The modern tendency to condescend towards serials robs this classic of proper respect: it is in fact one of the truest representations of the Rohmerian netherland. The entire serial makes fairly close use of plots from six Fu Manchu books..."

The complete DRUMS OF FU MANCHU serial was shown two months later, on the evening of June 20, again with several SRS members in attendance. The five-hour program more than lived up to expectations.

An assortment of sixteen scenes from the serial has been published as *Serial Pictorial No. 5: DRUMS OF FU MANCHU*. The booklet is available at $1.00 from F. and S. F. Book Co., P. O. Box 415, Staten Island, NY 10302. (However, the minimum order accepted by F. and S. F. is $2.00. The company carries a full stock of current sf and fantasy hardcovers and paperbacks, including such recent Sax Rohmer titles as THE SECRET OF HOLM PEEL @ 60¢, THE ROMANCE OF SORCERY @ 95¢, and the Pyramid Fu Manchu editions at various prices. An earlier paperback of THE DAY THE WORLD ENDED is also still available, @ 40¢. Request a copy of the company's current catalogue.) *(continued on page 10)*

# Were Houdini's Feats Supernatural?

by Sax Rohmer

*Stone walls do not a prison make,*
*Nor iron bars a cage---*
*Richard Lovelace*

Houdini was one of the most fascinating characters I have ever known. His death was a blow to me, although intervals of many months, sometimes of a whole year, elapsed between our meetings. He for his part would maintain contact by sending newspaper cuttings from all over the world dealing with his extraordinary exploits: perhaps a picture showing him suspended head downwards from a flag-staff some thirty-five or more floors above the streets of New York, or a paragraph announcing that he had accepted a challenge to escape from the strongroom of a bank. Characteristic comments would be scribbled in the margin: "This is really a tough job" or "It looks hard to most people, but *you* would say: 'Now show me something.'"

Within his own territory Harry Houdini reigned as undisputed king. Professional illusionists sometimes speak disparagingly of his technique in certain respects. No man could ever disparage his supreme showmanship.

No professional magician within living memory has excited so much controversy. His latter years were largely devoted to the exposure of fake mediums and others who battened upon the credulous. Spiritualism in some of its aspects he would have liked to stamp out, and I know of nothing more curious -- in fact or fiction -- than the friendship between Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Shortly after Houdini's death Conan Doyle published an article in which he made the extraordinary accusation against his

*From the Manchester EMPIRE NEWS, 27 March 1938.*
*Copyright 1938 by Sax Rohmer. Reprinted by permission of Mrs. Elizabeth Sax Rohmer.*

former friend that Houdini employed occult powers in some of his performances and, whilst fully aware of the truth of their claims, persecuted Spiritualists! Sir Arthur and I exchanged a slightly acid correspondence on this subject. I regretted it the last time I saw the creator of Sherlock Holmes.

This was on the terrace of Shepheard's Hotel in Cairo, and already the shadow of the end rested upon that fine, kindly face. As a doctor, Doyle had no illusions about his own symptoms. It is in such a case that a medical man requires greater courage than a layman. The layman is always buoyed up with the hope that his advisers may be mistaken. The physician knows there is no mistake.

Conan Doyle was by no means alone in believing that Houdini employed supernatural powers in some of his illusions and, despite many a book describing in detail with diagrams and other illustrations exactly how these illusions were performed, in the face of facts presented by my friend Will Goldston, president of the Magician's Club (who actually made some of the apparatus used by Houdini), I must confess that whilst I discredit entirely the supernatural theory held by Sir Arthur I am by no means convinced that the means employed were not super-normal.

That Houdini, who was the son of a Rabbi -- indeed, of a line of Rabbis -- had delved deeply into occultism all over the world is common ground. He had a library on the subject which in certain respects was unique. The librarian whom he employed on the occasion of my last visit (he was an old Englishman) informed me that the completion of the catalogue alone would occupy him for another three years -- if he lived to complete it!

Houdini knew all the tricks of the Indian fakirs -- or most of them. He could remain under water for three minutes. Although of small stature he was remarkably powerful -- he could wield an axe with any woodsman. He had developed muscles usually neglected by European athletes, for in certain respects Houdini was purely Oriental. He understood the art of breathing -- an art which is unknown to the West. He could pick up a pin with his toes. He could hold a needle between his lips and thread it with his tongue.

Houdini used either hand with equal facility. He could apparently see in the dark, judging from certain experiences I had with him. There was no lock of any kind which he had failed to open, using no visible implements.

In short, his equipment was such that for any living illusionist to dream of taking his place would be vain indeed. Those further gifts with which Conan Doyle and others have endowed him were suggested to me on several occasions when I found myself in his company.

As an illustration of what I mean: One afternoon in New York he called for me and insisted, although I was very busy, that I

must go to see a new picture theatre then recently opened and to hear the fine orchestra which was playing there.

I suggested a taxi, but: "We can walk it quicker," said Houdini. Beyond any shadow of doubt he was right. If we had discarded out material bodies and become spirits we could not have proceeded more swiftly through the dense crowds upon the sidewalks of New York. But when we came to Times Square, which we had to cross, I had an experience which today remains unique. We crossed it against the traffic lights!

Houdini firmly grasping my left arm, we darted across that wide, terror-laden space, missing speedy cars by fractions of an inch, diving behind others, pausing momentarily, dodging forward again, and finally reaching the opposite side of the Square. Afterwards I likened this extraordinary transit to swimming the rapids of Niagara. I should think the odds against success are about the same.

But stranger things -- although things not so perilous -- were to come. Long queues were lined up outside the theatre, so that any idea of entering appeared to be vain. Nevertheless we entered.

One so well known as Houdini could quite easily have obtained seats by means of merely sending a message to the management. Nothing of the kind occurred, however. No one seemed to recognise him. Attendants, fighting with the throng in file before the box-office, never so much as glanced in our direction. We walked in and walked up the stairs to the circle. No one challenged us -- no one asked us for our tickets -- no one asked for Houdini's card!

Apparently no one saw us. We walked into the circle. Houdini glanced about for a moment and then, again grasping my arm, led me to two unoccupied seats adjoining the centre gangway in the second row. He drew my attention to the architectural characteristics of the building, and we listened to the orchestra. Admittedly it was a good orchestra.

"We don't want to see the picture," he said, "we are going on somewhere else."

And standing up just as the picture commenced, we went out as we had come in, unchallenged and apparently unseen!

During this particular visit to New York I was staying in an old hotel now demolished, the regulations of which were so severe that for any human being other than a resident to gain access to one of the apartments unannounced was, I should have supposed, nearly impossible.

The routine was this: The 'phone would ring and someone in the reception office would say, "Mr. Smith to see you. Is he to come up?" Upon your reply -- Yes or No -- the immediate destiny of Mr. Smith depended. Yet at all hours of the day and night, indeed as late as 3 A.M., Harry Houdini, without even the pre-

liminary of a knock, would open the door of my apartment and walk in!

At first these visitations startled me. Soon I grew used to them. But they excited my curiosity so intensely that on certain occasions I went to the trouble of making enquiries. I questioned everybody from the floor clerk and the liftmen down to those members of the staff on duty in the reception office and vestibule; the outside porters were paraded. All of them were prepared to swear that Houdini had neither come in nor gone out!

That period in New York of which I am thinking was one I am never likely to forget. Houdini, if he did not save my sanity, certainly saved my professional reputation, for I found myself in a difficult position.

Up to this time I had held a theory that the best way to write a mystery story of the "Who did it?" type was for the author to be as mystified as the reader. In other words, my method was this: I would stage a murder under conditions which seemed to preclude any human agency. Every possible outlet for the murderer would be securely sealed. It would be, in short, the perfect crime. At this stage I would introduce my investigator and I would approach the problem from the point of view of this character: I mean that I would examine any clue which I myself had left and, working on from that point, would seek the solution. Obviously, if the author does not know the criminal, the reader has small chance of discovering him!

I was under contract to an American magazine to write a serial story by a certain date; the character of this story was not specified otherwise than that it should be "a mystery story." When the time came to tackle the job, I approached it in this spirit of ignorance.

At the outset I caused a celebrated medical consultant, retired, to be murdered at his own dinner table under circumstances which pointed to death from natural causes. By every means at my command during the early stages of the story I eliminated any possibility of human agency. The result was dramatic and very puzzling. Then, having introduced my investigator, by name Paul Harley, I assumed his duties and looked about for clues pointing to a criminal.

I could find none!

It is unlikely that I shall forget the night when the fact dawned upon me that the mystery I had created was not susceptible of solution. I had defeated myself. I had smoked several ounces of tobacco -- and had drunk more than half a bottle of Jamaica run -- when at the hour of 4 A.M., I ceremoniously tore up the typescript which lay upon my desk, and went to bed. Next morning I commenced another serial altogether. *[The interrupted serial was FIRE-TONGUE, and the second serial was the other Paul Harley novel, BAT WING. - Ed.]*

As I have explained, no synopsis of the proposed story had been submitted to the New York editor; therefore I was at liberty to write anything I pleased. My second attempt ran so smoothly that I completed it (about 80,000 words) in a month; this still remains my record. I had just revised the last chapter when the blow fell...

The agent who acted for me at this time had left for America a few days before the tragic truth dawned upon me -- that the mystery of the first story was impenetrable. On completion of the second I cabled him, giving date of delivery of manuscript. I received a three-page cablegram in reply (and he was born in Aberdeen) revealing the ghastly facts. Unknown to me he had taken a copy of the opening chapters, totalling some 30,000 words, with him and had delivered them to the New York magazine. And the magazine had commenced publication!

My immediate presence in New York was demanded. One installment had already appeared; a second was about to follow. Only three were in hand.

Under these dreadful conditions I sailed for America on a fast ship, preoccupied the whole way over with my notes, reviewing the problem from every conceivable angle, starting from the beginning and working up to the point where Paul Harley took over the case. When I reached New York no solution of the mystery had presented itself.

Joseph Coll, whose pen drawings remain unchallenged to this day, had been commissioned to illustrate. I found my hotel room decorated with beautiful originals by this master of black and white.

Prohibition was rife, but a miniature cellar had been inst installed in my apartment -- a dictaphone -- a typewriter -- every aid to literary production of which the anxious editorial staff could think. I set to work feverishly.

One discovery I had made in this maddening problem: the alteration of a single line of dialogue in Chapter Three would have given me a clue... But Chapter Three had already been published!

It was necessary for me to adopt a rigorous routine: I must produce a minimum of 1200 words a day, and never sleep until those 1200 words had been written. I lived the life of a hermit attired in pyjamas and dressing gown: smoking - smoking - smoking, and writing - writing - writing. Nevertheless, a time came when I was only a fortnight behind publication. I produced another installment, but it served merely to plunge me deeper in the mud as far as the solution was concerned.

The printers began to catch up on me. At one point I reached a stage where I was turning out copy page by page from my apartment to a team of messengers connecting with the printing press!

At this point, enter Houdini...

If I was worried about my contract, and Heaven knows I was -- the reputation of one of the leading magazines in the United States was wholly in my keeping -- Harry Houdini was deeply concerned about me. He insisted upon certain hours of relaxation, almost literally carrying me from the building at times. He took me to meet interesting people. He made parties to amuse me. I ate Thanksgiving dinner at his hospitable board in the old house which harboured the wonderful library. I wore a tweed suit over pyjamas, for he would take no refusal. I suppose in fact that I was fairly near the cracking point when Houdini offered me the solution of the mystery.

Unannounced, he appeared one night when I was pacing the floor on the verge of desperation. The door opened, and he was there! He carried a copy of the magazine in which that installment including Chapter Three had appeared. I had not told him of the piece of dialogue which, had it never been printed, would have enabled me to save the situation; in the circumstances I had thought that to do so would be useless. But he had read every line of the story, approaching it as he would have approached a problem of escape from a locked box. Now he opened the pages and pointed to a sentence which he had underlined. He had found it for himself!

"The character who said that has been dropped out," he remarked. "Bring him back, and have Paul Harley tax him on that statement. Think of a reason why he lied -- make him change the words... and you're saved!"

It was true! By means of this simple device -- or it seemed simple when Houdini pointed it out -- of forcing one character to admit that he had lied, my difficulties vanished like smoke!

To make real Harry Houdini's amazing showmanship to those who may never have seen him perform (although it seems incredible, I realise that he has been dead for ten years) I will describe a "challenge night," for which occasion he made me a present of a stage box. His generosity not only of mind but of spirit set him apart in a selfish world.

The challenge which he had accepted came from a firm of packing-case makers. On my arrival I was shown at the side of the stage a formidably powerful crate, perhaps three feet square, made of three-quarter inch oak and of a strength and solidity safely to have carried a heavy casting from one side of the earth to the other. The makers of this perfect crate -- carpenters, joiners, foreman, and works manager -- were present. When in due course the crate was carried on to the stage, they certified to a man that it was of their manufacture. All remained on the stage throughout.

Houdini got into the crate, coiling himself up so that the lid could be attached. Carpenters under the foreman's direction hammered the lid on with two-inch wire nails. I doubt if any

box ever contained more nails. Houdini had caused four air holes to be bored before he entered. Now, the lid being nailed on and very effectively nailed, he poked a finger through one of these holes and the finger was solemnly shaken by the foreman carpenter. The crate was now roped up, and the ropes were knotted securely. This being admitted and passed by everyone present, a small screen or tent was lowered over captive and crate.

Nothing could be seen. The mystery of Houdini's routine was hidden from us. But after an interval of five or six minutes, during which the band played, the tent was thrown aside. Houdini, dramatically dishevelled, stepped out.

A burst of applause greeted his appearance. This certainly was remarkable enough under the circumstances. But greater mystery was to follow. The carpenters and other members of the committee rushing eagerly forward, it now became apparent that every knot was intact, and that every nail was in place! The packing case, so far as skilled scrutiny could show, was in precisely the same state as when Houdini had been nailed inside it!

One has to appreciate the difference between an escape from a trick box designed for the purpose and one from a piece of solid carpentry such as I have described, and constructed with the opposite purpose -- to *prevent* escape -- to appreciate the peculiar genius of Harry Houdini. Small wonder that Conan Doyle accused him of possessing supernatural powers!

I relate this escape from a packing-case exactly as I saw it. No doubt the president of the Magicians Club, if you cared to become a member, would explain how it can be done. But even if he did so, I have no hesitation in saying that neither you nor any other man alive today could do it as Houdini did it.

With the death of Harry Houdini the world lost the last of those men of genius who devoted their lives to mystifying and delighting their contemporaries.

Houdini did more than this. He faced professional disaster, scandal and abuse in his endeavours to destroy those impostors who, employing elementary methods known to every professional magician, wrought upon bereavement. Such impostors roused him to fierce anger. The blindness of their dupes more than once resulted in charges of duplicity against my old friend, which I know and shall ever be prepared to maintain were false and vicious.

Mrs. Houdini has now publicly declared that the code known only to herself and her husband (by means of which they arranged, should it be possible in the next life, to communicate with one another) has failed to come through. This is to be expected even in the case of one for whom "stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage." Houdini, the master illusionist, was the enemy of impostors. He was one of the greatest showmen the stage has ever known. And he was my friend. ■

# Sax Rohmer
## and the Art of Making Villains

by Anice Page Cooper

Sax Rohmer, who has created more numerous and fascinating villains than anyone since Gilbert and Sullivan, admits that this art of thrill-making was not entirely a natural gift. It was developed by a series of experiments with various other professions, each of which gave him some special bit of knowledge or ingenious idea for the alluring black magic of his stories. From *Dr. Fu-Manchu* to *Yellow Shadows*, Rohmer has flashed against richly exotic backgrounds such diabolically ingenious and irresistable villains as one trusts this world has never seen.

Sax Rohmer's own dizzy career has been a series of valiant attacks on fortune and hasty retreats when he met her face to face. He has always intended to be an author, and although he assures a biographer that he wrote nothing worthy of mention before the age of four, his first serious work, "The Man in the White Hat," was written sometime during his early school days. The boy had fallen under the spell of Mark Twain, and this story was the outcome. It was rejected by every periodical published in Great Britain.

At the age of nineteen, young Sax had one wall of his den papered with a design made up of editorial regrets. By this time, there were ten or a dozen short stories which had travelled separately over the entire United Kingdom. Forced to the conclusion that editors were not reading his stories, the youthful author hit upon the scheme of affecting writing paper of unusual colour and envelopes of extraordinary size. Nothing happened. Finally, two stories were accepted within twenty-four hours of each other. One editor asked Rohmer to call, and suggested that he do a series of stories dealing with the same character. The shock was nearly fatal. The boy immediately left England and wrote no more for five or six years. He studied in several art schools with the intention of becoming a black-and-white artist, although he met with nothing but discouragement. Being young, failure stimulated him immensely. He worked day and night and bombarded the illustrated press with drawings. Then one day *Judy* accepted a drawing and asked him to call. From that day to

*From AUTHORS AND OTHERS by Anice Page Cooper, Doubleday, Page & Co., 1927. Copyright 1927 by Doubleday, Page & Co. Reprinted by permission.*

this, he has done no more drawings.

Abandoning art, Rohmer converted a "studio" into a rehearsal theater and, with three partners, prepared a one-act play for the variety stage. They finally secured a "trial week," but the playlet "got the hook," and thus closed this dramatic episode.

The next plunge was into musical composition, but the music publishers were not impressed. With lyrics and light concert numbers, however, Rohmer had fair success. A friend introduced him to a famous concert artist, for whom he immediately wrote a character song which the artist resolutely declined to sing. Spurred to renewed efforts, he wrote others, and finally the artist tried one with success. Things went swimmingly. Then came the end. The artist offered him a contract, and a music publisher in London requested him to join his staff.

Immediately, Rohmer got in touch with a tramp skipper and was arranging a voyage to South America when a long-missing friend, a medical student, turned up with a scheme for putting a new kind of moth ball on the market. After feverish periods of chemical activity, the two young promoters were forced to admit that the moth balls failed to attract. In an idle moment, Rohmer rewrote an old story, which elicited from a publisher a proposition to continue the series indefinitely. It was a crucial moment. A steamer carrying general cargo was leaving the Thames for Spanish ports on the following morning. Rohmer resisted the temptation and stayed in London to complete his first series. Since then, other pursuits, no matter how alluring, have failed to entice him away from his most fascinating of occupations, the art of making villains.

FROM THE EDITOR:

Three of the items in this issue come under the heading of "old business." The articles by Miss Herzog and Mr. Biggers are replies to the analysis of the Zagazig code by Jeffrey Weiss in issue #4. (Two other articles on the same subject were received, but too late to be considered for publication.) The reprint, "Were Houdini's Feats Supernatural?", includes Sax Rohmer's own version of the FIRE-TONGUE incident discussed by John Harwood in the last issue. This article is one of a series of twelve autobiographical essays which Sax Rohmer wrote in 1938 for the Sunday editions of the Manchester *Evening News*. Bearing the overall title "Pipe Dreams," this series discussed various incidents in Rohmer's life, provided background material on many of his stories, and described some famous people he had known. By the gracious permission of Mrs. Elizabeth Sax Rohmer, we will be able to present further selections from this series in future issues. For those readers who are impatient *(continued on p. 11)*

 *(continued from inside front cover)*

Also of interest to serial buffs is the bi-monthly journal *Those Enduring Matinee Idols*, edited and published by Robert Malcomson, 38559 Asbury Park Drive, Mt. Clemens, MI 48043; single copy, $1.00, year's subscription $5.00 in the U.S. and Canada, $6.00 elsewhere. Issue #7 should be available by the time you read this. Previous issues have included photographs and information on Henry Brandon, John Merton, and William Royle, three of the players in the DRUMS OF FU MANCHU serial. Full coverage of this serial, in pictures and text, is promised for a future issue of TEMI.

Dr. Rossman has passed on a newspaper article announcing the birth of a child to Fu Manchu. This is not a hitherto unknown notice of the birth of Fah Lo Suee, but rather the announcement of the birth, at the Henry Doorly Zoo in Omaha on March 1st, of the offspring of Fu Manchu and Tia, two orangutans.

What we may hope is the final word on Fu Manchu and mustaches was provided recently by Dunagin, creator of the syndicated newspaper cartoon "Tell It Like It Is." This particular panel shows two trench-coated Secret Service types on a street corner, with one of them saying to the other: "You'll recognize Fu Manchu by his Joe Namath mustache." (Thanks to Tom Moriarty for sending in this item.)

Luther Norris' *Pontine Dossier* has once again (vol. 2, no. 5) printed an item of interest to Rohmer fans. This is a letter, "discovered" by Bob Hahn, from Dr. Watson to Sherlock Holmes, in which Watson protests Holmes' going out on cases without him and trying to deceive him by employing a disguise and the *alias* of Moris Klaw... The *Dossier*, by the way, has now been converted into an annual publication in chapbook format. The first of the new series should be available now. After advance orders have been filled, there will remain about 75 copies for sale at $3.00 each. Previous publications which are still available at $3.00 each include: the Roy Hunt portfolio, FU MANCHU AND COMPANY; THE SHERLOCKIAN DOYLE (containing Conan Doyle's "Man with the Watches" and "The Lost Special"); SHERLOCK HOLMES: TWO SONNET SEQUENCES by Jacob C. Solovay; and THE PROBLEM OF THE PURPLE MACULAS, a 14,000-word Sherlockian pastiche by James C. Iraldi. (Address: Luther Norris, 3844 Watseka Avenue, Culver City, CA 90230.)

Luther also offers another Cassin-Scott figurine as a companion piece to the statuettes of Moris Klaw and Fu Manchu already mentioned in previous issues of TRR. This one shows Fu in European attire, and is the same price and size ($20, 12 inches high) as the others. The casting of Fu in Oriental dress has recently been revised: Fu is now without moustache, as he should be, . and wearing a longer Mandarin robe. For a photograph of the old-style Fu statuette, see page 21.

Luther has most generously offered to donate one of the Fu Manchu castings as a prize for the best original article published in *The Rohmer Review* during 1970-71. We offer our sincere thanks for this gesture, and for his many other services to the Society.

The long survey article on Sax Rohmer's works which occupied the major part of our first issue is to be reprinted. In considerably revised and expanded form, it will be included in the anthology THE MYSTERY WRITER'S ART, edited by Francis M. Nevins, Jr., which is scheduled for publication by the Bowling Green University Popular Press sometime this Fall or Winter. Exact price and date of publication are not available now; full details will be given in our next issue.

Sometime in 1971, Bowling Green will publish the long-awaited biography of Sax Rohmer, MASTER OF VILLAINY, by Elizabeth Sax Rohmer and Cay Van Ash. The manuscript is now in the final stages of preparation. Readers who saw the article "Master of Menace" in the October 1969 issue of *M. D. (Medical Newsletter)* have had a preview of the biography: much of the text of that article was adapted from the manuscript of MASTER OF VILLAINY, and several of the photographs accompanying the article will also appear in the book. (Other portions of the *M. D.* article were based on the above-mentioned survey article from TRR #1.) The August 1970 issue of *M. D.* is reported to contain a companion piece to last year's article; this one is devoted entirely to Sir Denis Nayland Smith.

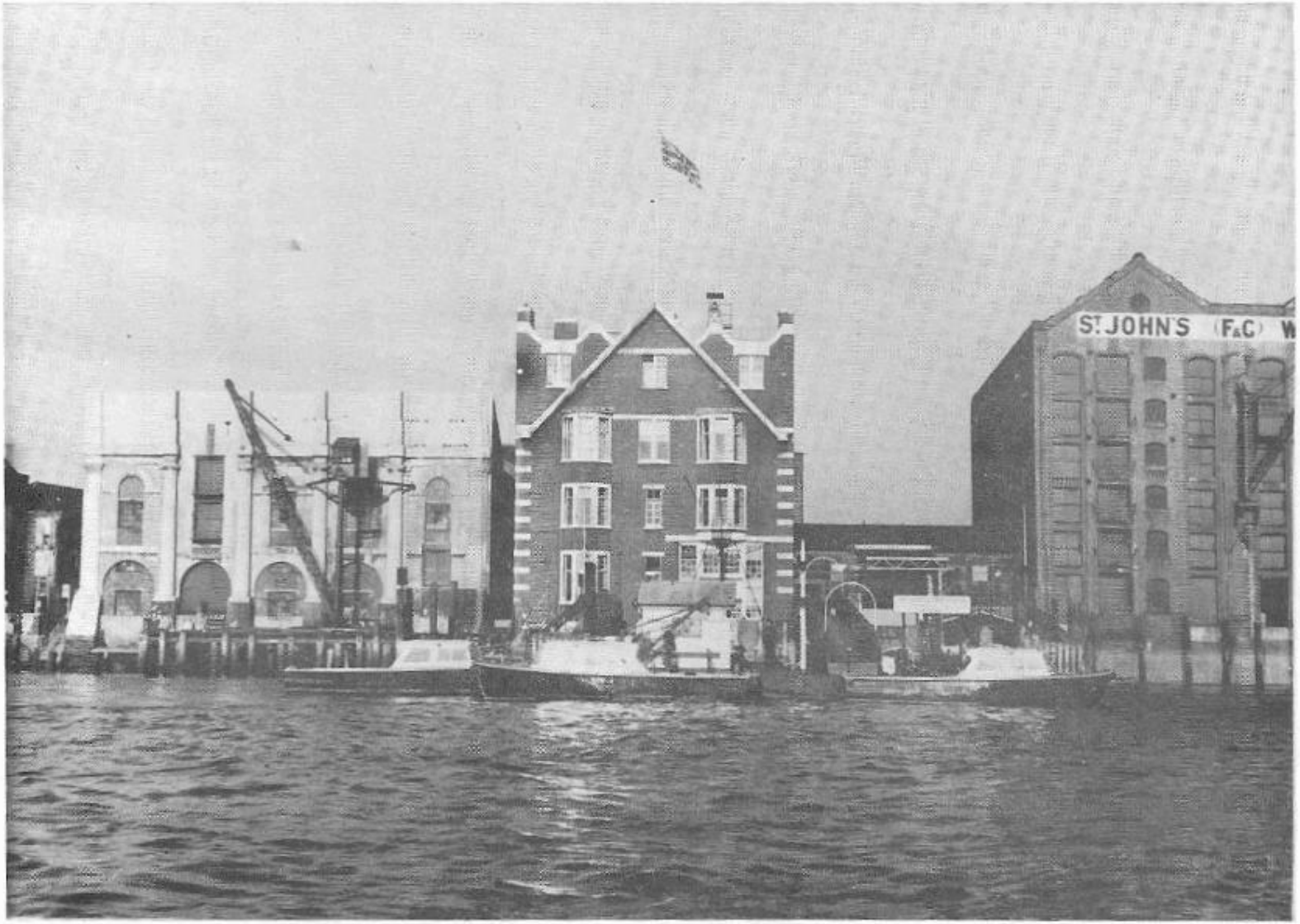
A reminder: all news items and information for the "Fleet Street Report" should be sent to Andrew Jay Peck, 2968 Perry Avenue, Bronx, NY 10458.

FROM THE EDITOR *(continued from p. 9):*

to read the entire series, a set of twelve tabloid-size photocopies of the originals is available from Brian Hughes (85, Raeburn Avenue, Surbiton, Surrey, England). The price is $10.00, including postage by sea-mail. For the really impatient, an extra $1.00 will bring the copies by air mail.

Future issues of TRR will probably not be as large nor, I hope, so long delayed as this one. I hope to have issue #6 in the mail by late January 1971. That issue will have an article by John Harwood which was crowded out of this issue at the last moment. Other contributions on hand or promised for future issues include articles on the Fu Manchu films, on Rohmer's stage plays (there were more of them than is commonly known),

*(continued on page 26)*




Metropolitan Police, "Thames" Division at Wapping

(Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Police Force, London; used by permission.)

# LIMEHOUSE
# and the River Police

by John E. Carroll

I.

In the period prior to and during World War I, when the first Fu Manchu stories were originally published, the northern shore of the Thames east of the Tower of London was composed mainly of the small but comfortable cottages and villas (or row-houses) of seamen and workers from the Docks -- Commercial, London, East India, and West India -- and a residue of decayed derelict houses, stables, and tumbledown edifices surviving from the 18th-century slums of Stepney, Poplar, Wapping, Shadwell, and Ratcliff. Limehouse itself is a district in the Stepney area (now a part of the Tower Hamlets). At Limehouse, Regent's Canal connects the English Midlands to the Lower Thames by means of Limehouse Cut, a channel linked to the River Lea.

West India Dock Road, together with Limehouse Causeway and Pennyfields in the Poplar district, was the center of the Chinese quarter at this time. The terrible devastation wrought by aerial bombings of these East End districts in World War II obliterated large areas. Today Limehouse has a large Greek population among a much reduced Chinese one.

To anyone residing in the river-front districts, the scenes of shipyards, factories and industrial complexes, gasworks, steam- and power-plants, wharves, warehouses and docks were familiar ones. At various vantage points it was possible to view, by day, the ships lying at anchor in the fairway or channel, awaiting berthings, or to see them at night as indistinct shadow-forms, with various colored lights to mark their positions. As in many older seaports, the approaches to the dockside areas -- where, with each swell, ships creaked at their moorings and the tide lapped against the pilings -- were made through narrow winding streets, cobbled alleys, and sordid passage-ways: a veritable maze of rabbit warrens. No sojourner in these districts, whether resident or visitor, could help but be receptive to the sensory phenomena of the waterfront: drizzling rain or steady downpour, mist or fog at nightfall; the sound of water coursing through the gutters or dripping mournfully from the roofs; the accompaniment of booming foghorns, shrill whistles from small river craft or dockside industries, and deep-throated klaxons of vessels putting out to sea; the feeble light filtering through bleary windows of taverns, and the muffled sounds of revelry within; the feeling of isolation after-hours, when the last reveler has departed and the scant illumination of a solitary lamp-post casts each shadow-shape in chiaroscuro detail...

All of these phenomena were familiar to Sax Rohmer, and by his superb skill and unsurpassed artistry he conveyed them vividly to the readers of his books. In the early Fu Manchu books, as well as in other stories, some of the most interesting action occurs in the waterfront areas along the River Thames. The river itself, often in real life regarded as London's longest street, was referred to in Rohmer's fiction as Fu Manchu's highway, his thoroughfare. At the time of these stories, as today, much of the waterfront area fell within the jurisdiction of the River Police, and its members were drawn into the plots of the tales with enjoyable frequency. In the examples cited below, we find references to many Thames-side locations and to the River Police.

Chapter IV of THE INSIDIOUS DR. FU-MANCHU opens as Nayland Smith calls Petrie's attention to a paragraph in the evening paper concerning the recovery from the Thames off Tilbury (to the east of London, almost at the mouth of the river) of the body of a lascar. (He was actually one of Fu Manchu's dacoits who had failed in an assassination attempt on Smith.) Shortly thereafter, Smith receives an urgent message from Inspector Weymouth to come to the Wapping River Police Station. The body of Cadby, "the most promising lad at the Yard," who had been working disguised as a seaman in the neighborhood of old Ratcliffe Highway, had been discovered beneath Commercial Dock Pier in Limehouse Reach. A week earlier, the body of another undercover policeman had been pulled up off Hanover Hole by the grapnel of the ten o'clock police boat. All three victims of the Thames -- the two policemen and the dacoit -- had had their fingers mutilated in the same unexplained fashion.

Fragments of Cadby's case-book lead a police detail to Shen-Yan's (also called Singapore Charlie's), a dope shop in one of the narrow alleys off the old Ratcliffe Highway, close to the river side. Inspector Ryman of the River Police conveys Weymouth, Smith and Petrie by launch to the Stone Stairs, where Smith and Petrie disembark and enter Shen-Yan's.

Much later in the same book (chapter XXVI), Smith, Weymouth and Petrie are borne along the river through the fog as prisoners on Fu Manchu's electric launch.

In THE RETURN OF DR. FU-MANCHU the action again gravitates toward the river. In chapter XI, Smith had set out in search of Shen-Yan, reputed to be in hiding in Limehouse, and nothing had been heard of him thereafter. Petrie, determined to search for Smith, engages a cab and proceeds toward the settlement off West India Dock Road, a small Chinatown within the confines of Limehouse Causeway and Pennyfields, containing Gill Street and Three Colt Street. He diverts his cab momentarily to the River Police Station along Ratcliffe Highway in order to seek out Inspector Ryman, their associate of two years before, from whom he learns that although Smith had been seen to enter Shen-Yan's suspected hiding place, a subsequent raid on that location directed by

Weymouth had disclosed no trace of Smith. Ryman assures Petrie that the hideout is under observation both from the shore and from the river, where two launches and a boat are patrolling from Limehouse to Tilbury. Since nothing further can be accomplished at the police depot, Petrie resumes his journey to Limehouse, through dismal, rain-swept streets. Alighting from his cab on a dark Thames-side wharf, Petrie follows a weird, mournful cry and ends up capturing a white peacock!

In chapter VIII of THE HAND OF FU-MANCHU, Dr. Petrie and Detective-Sergeant Fletcher, both in disguise, set out to visit John Ki's establishment, known as the Joy-Shop, a gambling house i in Shadwell, next to the river. There they manage to rescue Nayland Smith, who had earlier been captured by Fu Manchu's agents.

Examples such as these could be multiplied endlessly. John Ki turns up again in THE TRAIL OF FU MANCHU, and Bart Kerrigan lives through some exciting adventures in Limehouse in the early part of THE ISLAND OF FU MANCHU. And there are, of course, the TALES OF CHINATOWN themselves. However, let the above episodes suffice.

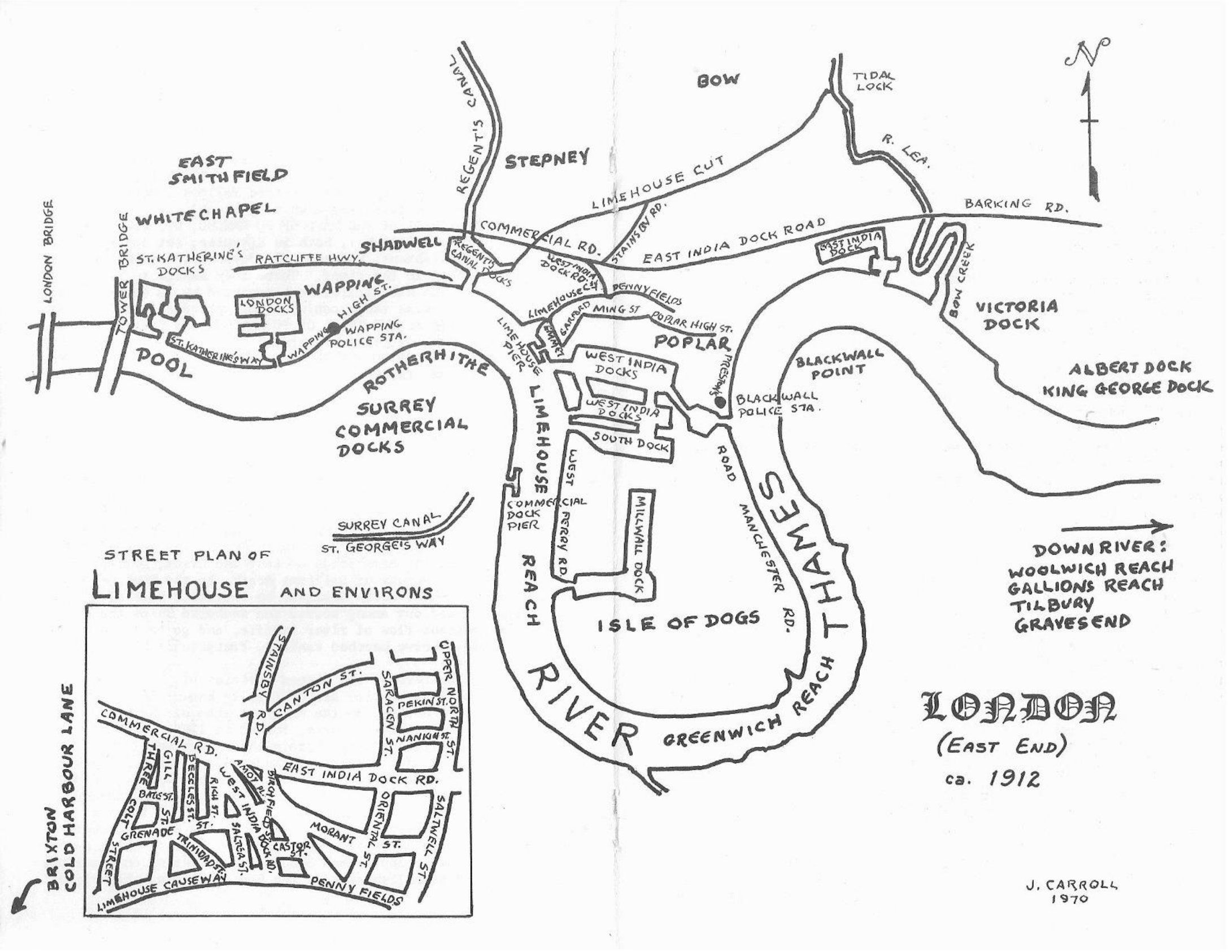
II.

The River Policeman is the guardian of the Thames. He is well versed in seamanship, in many cases from experience gained during service in the Royal or Merchant Navy; he is thoroughly familiar with the waterfront locales which he must patrol. Behind him is a tradition of 150 years of law and order on the river.

Police boats patrol from Woolwich Reach, the seaward end of the Thames at the marshlands of Kent and Essex, upriver through the ship-filled fairway of Gallions Reach, to the Pool of London. During patrols these boats navigate an intricate maze of shipping: they weave in and out among moored and anchored ships and buoys, skirt the constant flow of river traffic, and go in close to the dock areas to observe berthed tankers, freighters, barges and tramp-steamers.

The headquarters of the Thames Division of the Metropolitan Police, as the River Police are officially known, is located at 259, Wapping New Stairs, on the original site of the headquarters of the first Marine Police Force, formed in 1798. (See photo.)

In the mid-18th century, before the existence of this force, the district east of the Tower of London was a thieves' paradise and a haven for pirates. The squalid slums of Wapping, Shadwell and Ratcliff contained the worst of the criminal brotherhood, harbored in a motley array of hovels, doss-houses, taverns, brothels and receivers' dens. St. Katherine's Way, a dismal highroad, made its circuitous way along the Thames, becoming Wapping Docks as it approached Shadwell. Bordering on Limehouse Reach were the establishments of the boat-builders, shipwrights




# LONDON

(EAST END)

ca. 1912

J. CARROLL
1970

and rigging makers. Many of the streets were unpaved, muddy and unlit, some giving access to the river by waterfront stairs and others leading inland to districts such as Whitechapel and East Smithfield on the north side of the river and Rotherhithe on the south side. Crime was nurtured by the appalling conditions that prevailed among the lumpers (i.e., dock-workers), unskilled laborers, and their offspring. Nightingale Lane, a conglomeration of vice-dens, had an unsavory reputation; many a drunken seaman who ventured there was "rolled" for his wages or abducted by roving press-gangs.

On the river, marauding gangs preyed without hindrance on shipping, all the way from Blackwall down-river, through Deptford and Woolwich Reach, and past Gallions Reach into the Pool of London. So many political, governmental and commercial personalities of the time were in the pay of this vast ring of organized crime that the chance of capture and punishment was treated merely as a calculated risk. Not all of the criminals escaped, however: down-river from the present site of the Thames Police Station stood Execution Dock and the Wapping Gallows, where Captain Kidd met his end.

By 1797 there existed a crime syndicate comprised of some of the wealthiest and outwardly most respectable men of commerce. These men used their businesses as fronts to cover their nefarious dealings with the pirates. Their retinue included "legal brains," ship's mates, crewmen, wharf guards, revenue officers, lumpers, and small tradesmen. Their strength was such that a boarding party could pillage the cargo of a vessel within sight of its crew and officers without fear of reprisal. It was estimated that at this time one third of the handlers of these cargoes were actively engaged in stealing merchandise or else were acting as receivers of stolen goods, a traffic affecting approximately fifty percent of the cargoes and ammounting to £500,000 in value annually.

Factors contributing to this situation were the monopolies exerted by the quay proprietors and wharfingers, who would agree to handle cargoes only if the owners would store the goods in the proprietors' warehouses; the increased trade with the Indies up to 1799; and the inadequate facilities for berthing vessels and discharging cargoes, resulting in cluttered, congested shipping lanes, and further exposing cargoes to plunder and pilferage.

Although the West India Company spent great sums to apprehend offenders, and although those found guilty of crimes on the river were "transported" to penal colonies or made to suffer barbaric punishments, there was little reduction in the depredations of the river gangs. However, a change was to be brought about through the efforts of two men.

The first of these was John Harriott, a world-travelled man of middle age, who had been a Naval officer, soldier, Judge Advocate and merchant. He was appalled at the conditions on the

Thames, having himself had to repulse a pirate attack. This led him to evolve a scheme for policing the river. When first proposed, his plan was rejected by the Lord Mayor of London.

The second man was Patrick Colquhoun, presiding magistrate at Queen's Square, Westminster, who had been working along the same lines as Harriott through facts derived from court cases involving crimes on the Thames. Colquhoun, an accomplished lawyer and clever businessman, had achieved success in his native Scotland by stimulating the development of industries in Glasgow and by founding, in 1783, the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce. He subsequently became a magistrate in London where, with his aide Jeremy Bentham, he tackled the problems of the West India Company.

A fortuitous meeting between Harriott and Colquhoun resulted in the consolidation of their two plans into one, and this was submitted to the Duke of Portland, Secretary of State. The West India Company decided to adopt their plan for creating a police force, and in March 1798 authorization was granted by Lord Portland, but without the sanction of Parliament.

In July 1798 the first Marine Police Force opened its headquarters in Wapping. This early Force consisted of two departments: a Judicial Department, with a Superintending Magistrate, Resident Magistrate, clerks and constables; and a Marine Police Force with a complement of House Surveyor, Surveyors (equivalent to Inspectors of Police), watermen, clerk and cashier. Colquhoun and Harriott held the magisterial positions. The cost of this organization was borne partially by the government, with the West India Company providing some police and watchmen.

Since the Marine Police often had to come to grips with violent and desperate criminals, the personnel were of necessity drawn from the ranks of seamen and watermen, hardy and resolute men accustomed to the extremes of weather conditions and to the ways of the waterfront. This new Force posted warnings, and acted upon them; but they faced a task of great magnitude, considering how greatly their small band was outnumbered. On one occasion, the headquarters itself was under siege, and John Harriott aided in its defense. Through determination, discipline and good leadership, the Marine Police Force finally succeeded in capturing and imprisoning most of the river criminals.

In 1839 the Marine Police Force was incorporated into the Metropolitan Police, becoming known as the Thames Division. The Judicial Department became the Thames Police Court. The Division consists of seven police stations in charge of a Chief Superintendent. Its territory covers fifty-four miles of the Thames, from Staines Bridge, Middlesex, to Dartford Creek, Kent, on the southern shore, and to the Havering Borough boundary on the northern side. In the beginning, stations were all located on hulks on the river. Eventually these stations were transferred to permanent buildings ashore, with a unique exception -- Waterloo

Pier, a police station built on pontoons.

In the early days, rowboats and sailboats were the only craft available to the river policemen -- mostly sailing cutters or small craft fitted with a lugsail. From 1885 to 1897, troublesome steam launches and early internal combustion engines were used. A nautical engineer, who became Sergeant Mitchell of the Wapping Workshop, experimented with and converted a number of rowboats to powered craft between 1906 and 1909. In 1910 the Force was equipped with custom-made motor boats. By 1968 their number had increased to thirty-six single-engine diesel-powered duty boats and three twin-screw launches having fibreglass hulls. The three launches, named the *John Harriott*, *Patrick Colquhoun*, and *Sir Robert Peel*, are used for special, supervisory and ceremonial duties. As the older boats are withdrawn from service, they are replaced by new craft with hulls and cabins of fibreglass.

To each of these boats are assigned three officers as crew, with an Inspector or Sergeant-in-Charge as coxswain, and two constables. Each boat is responsible for the patrol of a specified part of the river.

Basically, the Thames Division exists for the protection of life and property on the river, on barges, wharves, ships, and the waterside; but it also assists at fires and collisions and in salvage of floating cargoes and drifting barges, and it enforces River By-Laws and Merchant Shipping Acts.

The River Police, with their detailed knowledge of treacherous currents, can predict with some accuracy where a floating or buoyant object should surface or lodge, providing the place and time of immersion have been determined. The Dragging Section operates a dinghy equipped with special apparatus from the Wapping Workshop, to be used in the recovery of bodies that have found their way into the Thames. Sometimes a pole-drag, a device resembling a four-fluked anchor attached to a long hardwood shaft, is used from rowboats and other small craft in shallow water. Magnetic drags are employed to recover weapins and other objects of ferrous metal. The River Police also has a contingent of nine frog-men.

In many ways, the River Police and their manner of operation have changed since the days of which Sax Rohmer wrote. But one thing has not changed -- their perpetual vigilance to preserve peace on the Thames.

References: Metropolitan Police, New Scotland Yard

NICK OF THE RIVER by Anthony Richardson, London: Harrap (The Story of Detective Inspector David Herbert Cyril Nixon)

THE RIVER POLICE by Tom Fallon, London: Frederick Muller, Ltd.

FU MANCHU by Jack Cassin-Scott

(see page 10)

(Photo by Jack Blake, London; courtesy of Luther Norris.)

Z;-A:-G. A-.Z,I;-G,Z-.A.-G;- A-Z;I:G.

by Evelyn Herzog

Having more spare time than good sense, I tried my hand at abstracting the key to the "Zagazig" code presented in THE HAND OF FU-MANCHU, and found it a fascinating project.* The first thing to be said about this code is that it is rather impractical. Because it runs so largely to marks of punctuation, it is extremely susceptible to misprints. My investigation disclosed evidence of certain misprints in the various editions of the book, probable misprints in the London paper which carried the coded messages, and most likely a misprint or two in Petrie's MS.

One wonders why Fu Manchu's organization bothered to use this method of communication at all. As the situation stood, Smith, Petrie, Weymouth & Co. were on the trail of the Chinese doctor in London. After a period of inactivity, a dacoit was found dead in the river near the wharf by Three Colt Street. Smith was to have had an appointment on Three Colt Street on the night of the murder but had been prevented from keeping it by an accident. The first coded message had appeared in the paper earlier that day. Smith properly concluded that the message had been a betrayal of his plans and an instruction to kill him. Chance had intervened to save him and destroy the dacoit through the person of Jack Forester, chief officer of the *S. S. Andaman*. The second message, directing another agent to make an attack on Smith at the Joy-Shop, appeared the next day. This time, however, Smith was prepared in advance; he and Forester despatched the second assassin. There followed the arrest of M. Samarkan, proprietor of the New Louvre Hotel and agent of Fu Manchu, who had written the coded messages. Samarkan was ultimately spirited away, but no more was ever heard of "Zagazig".

As part of the secret plot, the "Zagazig" code was a notable failure. By its conspicuousness it betrayed not only its messages but also the people immediately connected with it. Indeed, it could hardly have failed to do so. While the personal columns of London newspapers have always tended to be more flamboyant than their American counterparts, entries as bizarre as the "Zagazig" messages were not ideally suited to blend into the

*My text is that of the U.S. hardcover version. (All U.S. hardcover editions were printed from the same plates.) Originally I had worked with the Pyramid paperback edition, but I found the hardcover edition to be more reliable. (In the Pyramid text, the 7th, 10th, and 39th letters of the first message are printed in Roman type, whereas they should be in Italic type.)

background. (There is no doubt, for instance, that Sherlock Holmes clipped and saved those intriguing items that week, just in case.) I find it hard to believe that the great Doctor would himself have employed so obvious a medium to carry messages to his henchmen. There were telephones, after all. However, it is possible that Samarkan, a less experienced and intelligent man, devised the code for his own use. At the time, Dr. Fu Manchu was convalescing from brain surgery performed by Sir Baldwin Frazer (with Petrie assisting) and was perhaps unaware of his underling's incompetent handling of what should have been a routine assassination.

Thus far the history of the code; I turn now to its form. There are several variables in the "Zagazig" code: upper and lower case letters; roman and italic letters; dashes and other marks of punctuation between the letters. Petrie himself told us (p. 153) that "the capitals...indicate the commencement of words." He gave us a second clue when he noticed that "the presence of a letter in *italics* altered the value of the sign which followed it." This means that the inventor of the code doubled the available number of code group combinations by using both roman and italic letters in each. Thus, if a roman letter followed by a dot represents the English letter "e", the same letter in italics followed by a dot will represent a different English letter, "r". (This is why Petrie at first read the "three" of the first message as "theee".)

At this point it would be as well to admit that I could not have drawn up the code table if Petrie had not given both the coded messages and the English texts to us. However, I think a trained cryptographer or a talented amateur (such as Smith or Petrie) might well have been able to unravel the messages on his own, just as Holmes did the "Dancing Men" code. Petrie's "half an hour", however, is very impressive.

The coded messages and their meanings, as given by Petrie, are as follows. First message (p. 138):

ZAGAZIG- Z,- a-. g.- *a*;- z:- *I*- g, *z*,- *a*,- g.- *a*, z;-
S m i t h P a s s i n g
*I*;- g:- *z*. a. g. A- *z*; i-: *g*;- *Z*,- *a*;- *g*. a. z. *i*;-
T h r e e C o l t S t r e e t
*G*;- *z*-, a. g-: *a*.- z. *I*;- g:- z.- *a*. *g*;- *a*-: *Z*-, i. g:
T w e l v e T h i r t y W e d
z, a. *g*,- a: z, *i*-: g.**
n e s d a y

---

**Italic letters have been emphasized by underlining.

Second message (p. 149):

ZAGAZIG- Z,- a-. g.- a;- z:- I:- g; z.- a, g;-
S m i t h G o i n g
A-, z; i-: G,- z:- a; g- A, z- i;- g. z.
J o y S h o p A f t e r

A; g, a. Z- i; g, z: a, g-: a z i g.
O n e M o n d a y

Petrie's second citation of the 15th through 27th letters of the first message (p. 153):

I;- g:- z. a. g. A. z; i-: g;- Z,- a;- g. a. z. i;- **
T h r e e C o l t S t r e e t

The extra letters at the end of each message were included simply to fill out the last "Zagazig," as Petrie points out.

After trying some other combinations, I obtained satisfactory results by taking as my code units each "Zagazig" letter together with all the punctuation following it.

*[At this point, we shall let another researcher take up the story. Miss Herzog's analysis of the code agrees in every detail with that given in the following article, and to avoid repitition we have given the solution only once. -Editor.]*

---

** Observant readers will have noted that the 18th letter in this message was given first as "A-" and here as "A."; the first reading is the correct one. It seems likely that the discrepancy arose in Dr. Petrie's manuscript, inasmuch as it occurs in both the British and U.S. hardcover editions, in the Pyramid edition, and in an early Greek translation of the book: Τὸ Χερὶ τοῦ Θεοῦ Μασσόν, Enossis Publishing Co., New York, 1920, pp. 71 and 79. This last, incidentally, is a wonderful edition. There is, of course, no way to distinguish between "roman" and "italic" lettering in the Greek alphabet, which decreases the code's value still further, but then the messages don't translate too well into Greek anyway...

# Z-.A,G;-A,Z-.I.-G;- Z.A.G.-A.-Z,-I.-G;-Z.A:GAZIG

by Julian L. Biggers

The recent attempt (in TRR #4) at deciphering the "Zagazig" code only supports the view that Fu Manchu's nature is truly insidious. The analyst, Mr. Weiss, fell into a number of traps of his own or the Doctor's making in reaching the erroneous conclusion that the code was not a code.

At least three problems confront the reader when attempting to break the cipher. First, the text states that an italicized letter changes the meaning of the *sign* following it. One interprets "sign" to mean "punctuation mark," but it must be kept in mind that the dash is a punctuation mark and has to be included in the deciphering effort. In neglecting the dash, Mr. Weiss displaced letters one place, thus creating dual (and sometimes triple) meanings for the letters. This also led to the omission of the letters g and t in the first message and p and r in the second message. Second, distinguishing between plain and italic type in the Pyramid edition is very difficult. The hardcover editions are clearer, and simplify making the distinctions needed for accurate decoding. For example, Mr. Weiss has the "I's" in the first message as plain type, when actually they are italicized. The problem continues for the "g" and "z" if care is not exercised. Third, there are several misprints in the text that lead to conflicting results. Dr. Petrie's explanation includes a portion of the first message -- "Three Colt Street" -- and its corresponding cipher. The cipher portion (p. 97 in Pyramid edition) contains an error: the text reads "A.z;" whereas the corresponding portion of the original message (p. 88) reads "A-z;". The latter is correct. There are also two errors in the second message (p. 95). In the first line, the portion of the message reading "I:-" should be "I;-" and in the second line the portion reading "A,z-*i*;-" should be "A,z,-*i*;-". The changes are small, but they are crucial for finding the correct translation of symbols to letters. Incidentally, the Methuen editions (under the title THE SI-FAN MYSTERIES) do not contain the error in the second line, while the McBride and Pyramid editions do have it. Thus this error must have been introduced in the American editions.

The code is a simple transposition of punctuation marks for letters of the alphabet. The fact that plain and italic type give different values to the signs that follow them suggests that the alphabet is divided in half; therefore only thirteen symbols

are needed. The five basic signs are the comma, semi-colon, dash, colon, and period. The next eight signs are constructed by combining the dash with the other four punctuation marks, giving ,- ;- :- .- and in the reverse order -, -; -: and -. . The full code is as follows:

| Code symbol | , | ; | - | : | . | ,- | ;- | :- | .- | -, | -; | -: | -. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Plain type | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M |
| Italic type | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z |

The specifications "plain" or "italic" refer, of course, to the letter in the repeated word "Zagazig" which precedes the code symbol to be deciphered.

A word about the code, now that it has been shown to *be* a code. The cipher is impractical as codes go. If it is difficult to break, it is also difficult to encipher and transmit. Entrusting an important message to a linotype operation where typographical errors regularly occur would seem foolhardy. The code is not flexible enough to be transmitted by other means, thus greatly limiting its usefulness. Whether this "Zagazig" code, with all its limitations, was developed by Fu Manchu or by M. Samarkan must be left to the conjecture of other scholars.

*[Interested readers may test their skill at decoding --and the editor's skill at encoding--by deciphering the titles of this essay and the preceding one. -Ed.]*

FROM THE EDITOR *(continued from p. 11):*

on THE ROMANCE OF SORCERY (including a comparison of the original and the abridged editions), and a further investigation of Sax Rohmer's London by John Carroll.

What contribution of *yours* may we add to this list?

# Dantean Allusions
## in "The Trail of Fu Manchu"

by J. R. Christopher

A consistent element in the Fu Manchu books of Sax Rohmer is imagery which suggests (to use the title of one of the Dead Sea Scrolls) "the War between the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness." Usually this warfare is depicted in terms of Fu Manchu as Satan attempting to mislead mankind; thus he is sometimes called the Devil Doctor. In THE TRAIL OF FU MANCHU, Fu Manchu is "a fiend -- a demon" in an early part of the third chapter; he is "Satan materialised" near the end of chapter eleven; he has a "composed, satanic mask" as his facial expression near the end of the forty-third chapter; he appears "like the devil" in the middle of the fifty-fifth and is called "this yellow devil" in a bit of ethnocentrism in the fifty-seventh. (Even the 1934 fog is devilish in this book -- "the triumphant fog-demon" in the first paragraph of chapter two and "that demon fog" in the last chapter.)

Further, Sax Rohmer uses Roman Catholic references in connection with Fu Manchu in this book, which suggests either that he expected a Protestant bias in his readers which would reinforce Fu Manchu's evil in their minds or that he considered such references esoteric, on the level of his use of Egyptian and Oriental details. (He compares Fu Manchu's appearance to that of the Pharaoh Seti I in chapters twenty and sixty.) We need not decide between the Protestant and the Romantic intentions (the author may not have clearly distinguished them), but the references have some interest in themselves. In chapter twenty, Fu Manchu is described as speaking with the beauty of "John Henry Newman ... the poet-cardinal," and at the end of chapter fifty-nine the "respectful gesture" made by a member of the Si-Fan upon mentioning the name of that organization resembles "the Roman Catholic Sign of the Cross." Near the beginning of chapter sixty the Si-Fan is compared to the Order of Jesuits on the basis of its influence and "its roots so deeply set in unsuspected quarters." **

---

** Editor's note: Both of Rohmer's parents were Catholics, and although Rohmer himself left the Church while still in his teens, he had absorbed a great deal of Roman Catholic doctrine and ritual. His admiration for Cardinal Newman, an Irishman, may have been based as much on nationality as on religion.

Related to these Roman Catholic references (and the central point of this note) are two interesting allusions to Dante and his *Divine Comedy*. The first of these references manages to mix Dante, Shakespeare and Satan in a fascinating medley describing Dr. Fu Manchu (chapter twenty-six):

> [His] coat, tunic fashion, was buttoned to his neck -- a lean sinewy neck supporting a head which might have been that of Dante.
>
> The brow was even finer than the traditional portraits of Shakespeare... [The face] was that of a man of indeterminable age, heavily lined, but lighted by a pair of such long, narrow, brilliant green eyes that one's thoughts flashed to Satan -- Lucifer, Son of the Morning: an angel, but a fallen angel.

The latter two comparisons are obviously to Fu Manchu's credit (if in the last case heavily qualified), but the reference to Dante is not so clear as to connotations. It seems to be a contrast between a lean neck and a large head, to judge from the stress of such a word as "supporting." I do not know if there was ever any idea that Dante had an unusually large head; presumably the unstated concept is simply that he was a great intellect and thus had a large cranial capacity. (The comment about Shakespeare's brow is of the same sort.) Thus the reference seems to be fairly neutral in regard to any personal attitude toward Dante: Rohmer reflects only a cultural generality at this point.

The second allusion appears at the beginning of the next chapter:

> Alan Sterling stood upon a wooden platform, clutching a rusty iron rail and looking down upon a scene which reminded him of nothing so much as an illustration of Dante's *Inferno*.

But the actual description is of men "swaddled like Egyptian mummies" working around a furnace which is (later in the chapter) a "miniature hell"; still later in the same chapter the Dantean analogy is repeated:

> And Sterling, descending, found himself at the bottom of the huge black shaft. The furnace was closed -- the Inferno dimly lighted.

Here again the image does not indicate any great knowledge of Dante -- indeed, the first reference is to an illustration (per-

haps Rohmer knew those of Gustave Doré) rather than to the poem itself. The general similarity of a pit with a fire in it to the archetypal Christian hell has presumably suggested the reference. And this possibility is reinforced by later references, such as this from the beginning of chapter thirty-seven:

> Sterling realized as the horror in this hell pit rose ever higher that the company of the shadows was now complete. ... It was the closest reproduction of the traditional hell which he believed could ever have been created.

Another such reference appears near the opening of chapter forty-two where Sergeant Murphy (a Roman Catholic) tells Nayland Smith, "We're in hell before our time, sir." (Back at the end of chapter sixteen Chief-Inspector Gallaho had commented that the blue light -- the outlet of the furnace -- "looks like something out of hell"; in chapter forty-six a policeman, Trench, comments from the top of the pit that he thinks the place leads down to hell.)

What I find especially interesting about the Dantean images quoted above is that they suggest that Sax Rohmer had *not* read Dante, rather than *vice versa*. Partially this may be argued on the basis of what analogies Rohmer fails to make (rather like Holmes' dictum on the dog in the night-time). The most spectacular of these is that Sterling descends into the cavern under the direction of Dr. Fu Manchu, but Rohmer never compares them to Vergil guiding Dante down the pit of the Inferno. This seems like an ultra-obvious comparison. Also, when they reach the bottom of the pit in chapter twenty-seven "a grateful coolness was perceptible" at the entrance to a side tunnel -- which might well have suggested the ice of the bottom-most circle of Hell in Dante's poem. Although Fu Manchu guides Sterling back up the stairs instead of through the center of the earth and up the other side, as Vergil does with Dante, the emergence of Fu Manchu and his three henchmen from the sewer, after the pit has been flooded by the Thames (as recounted by the night watchman in chapter fifty-one), gives rise to no allusions to Dante and Vergil at last seeing the stars.

Another omitted analogy is the Burman's execution of Ali Oke by beheading at the end of chapter thirty-seven (is it another mark of ethnocentrism that a Nubian is killed but not an Englishman?); a fairly obvious comparison is with the situation in the Ninth *Bolgia [the beginning of Canto XXVIII - Ed.]* where a demon is mutilating schismatics and other sowers of discord.

A final missed opportunity occurs when Gallaho, in chapter forty-eight, climbs down the rope ladder and rescues Smith, Sterling and Sergeant Murphy from the flooding pit. A comparison might have been made to the angel which walks across the water

before the City of Dis to rescue Dante and Vergil from the threat of Medusa and the locked gate.

But negative comparisons hardly offer positive proof. Perhaps of more importance are the limitations of the comparisons which Rohmer does make. The first, between Fu Manchu and Dante, would be ludicrous if we took it to be between "the evil doctor" and the Christian pilgrim of the poem; as a comparison of the intelligence of the Chinese genius and the Italian poet it is dated in its assumption about brain sizes but is at least understandable.

More significant are the two comments about hell's fiery furnace. This is a Christian commonplace (presumably based on "the ever-burning fires of Gehenna" in the New Testament), but it does not happen to be used explicitly in Dante's *Inferno*. Dante's uses of fire or fiery objects are seven.

The City of Dis has red-hot iron walls, but no torment is connected with them directly. Immediately inside the City of Dis lie the graves of the Heretics, which are white-hot. Down a precipice from this area is the river Phlegethon, the river of fiery blood, in which Tyrants are boiled. On the same level as the river is a stretch of sand on which flakes of fire rain down and on which the Violent spend eternity. Further down in the Inferno the punishments by fire are fewer in percentage to the number of crimes punished. The Simoniacs are plunged head-first into stone holes with their feet on fire; the Barrators are poked down by devils into boiling tar; and the Counsellors of Fraud are encased in flames -- moving flames, since they walk around their *bolgia* in them. The bottom of the Inferno is the frozen Lake of Cocytus, which is hardly fiery. Probably of these punishments that of the Heretics is closest to Rohmer's furnace, although the Centuars who keep the Tyrants in Phlegethon and the Demons who keep down the Barrators may suggest Fu Manchu and his followers, with their willingness to feed to the furnace any of their enemies. But none of the Dantean images are used precisely -- Rohmer's furnace is only a general Christian image.

If the type of general comparisons made and the failure to make certain other comparisons do indicate that Sax Rohmer had not read Dante's *Inferno*, then an interesting conclusion may be drawn: Rohmer's allusions reflect the general cultural association of Dante with Hell which began in the late eighteenth century with the Gothic movement -- an association that emphasizes only the *Inferno*, ignoring the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*. I conjecture that Rohmer used the comparison of heads simply on the basis of thinking of geniuses; he then compared his pit to Dante's Inferno fifteen paragraphs later because the reference to Dante had reminded him of that part of the poem. His references reveal his cultural background: Dante was a genius who wrote about Hell. The latter clause is only one-third right.

# Letters to Limehouse

*Mrs. Elizabeth Sax Rohmer has sent a clipping of the "Looking at Books" column from the London EVENING NEWS for 13 March 1970, containing a review of a recent book called THE INNER TEACHINGS OF THE GOLDEN DAWN (by R. G. Torrens; published by Neville Spearman, 1969, 42/-). In listing some of the members of The Golden Dawn, one of the most famous occult "secret societies" of recent times, the reviewer included the name of Sax Rohmer. (The membership roster has included, at various times, such people as Arthur Edward Waite, Dion Fortune, Arthur Machen, William Butler Yeats, and Aleister Crowley.) The book itself, unfortunately, contains no reference to Rohmer, being concerned, as its title indicates, with the beliefs and doctrines of the society.*

*Accompanying the clipping was the following letter.*

From Mrs. Elizabeth Sax Rohmer, Sussex, England:

I thought you might like to know of this interesting sidelight on my husband's activities, which I knew nothing about -- although of course I knew of his beliefs upon this subject, since I shared them, and still believe in the life of the spirit continuing until it reaches perfection.

The reference in the cutting to Aleister Crowley is so true. My husband knew him and detested him for his "fall," as Sax called it: using his inner knowledge for base purposes.

Regarding the reference to "how it all started": I believe that the group referred to was the inner or true Rosicrucians. My husband was brought into this Brotherhood by a great friend, much older than himself, Dr. R. Watson Councell, who incidentally also brought my husband into the world. Dr. Councell was a teacher to my husband in occult matters all through his life. I know my husband could practise certain rites which went very deep into the subject. However, because one of its rules was that a man must remain celibate if he wished to become a "Master," it was not possible for Sax to get to the great heights.

You will have noted in MASTER OF VILLAINY the references to my husband's little affairs with women. So I was shocked one morning around two o'clock, getting out of bed to make him coffee (as I often did), to find him doing incantations in a darkened room, with the *Book of the Dead* open before him! I quickly switched on the light and interrupted him. He was furious, but I was right, as I told him. "You have not lived a perfect life and you know it, Sax. What are you trying to do? How can you be so stupid? You can only rouse evil, which could follow you forever!"

Sax was a good man fundamentally, but like all of us he had a few weaknesses. He was deeply religious in all things affecting the spirit.

Oddly enough, I have strange premonitions -- always have had. They come out of the blue and I can see no reason for them at the time. I am frightened of this ability, and would never have anything to do with Sax's magic (as I called it), although he tried hard to persuade me, knowing I had this odd gift. I have told him and others many things that would happen. I can give no reasons -- I just suddenly have to say what comes into my mind. It has always come true, and I am terrified about it long afterwards. I really do *not* like it!

*MASTER OF VILLAINY is, of course, Mrs. Rohmer's biography of her husband, written in collaboration with Cay Van Ash. See this issue's "Fleet Street Report" for more information.*

*The following letter offers an addendum to the article on Limehouse in this issue.*

From John E. Carroll, Baltimore, Maryland:

I know you will recall the difficulty I had in locating "old" Ratcliffe Highway. The many times that Sax Rohmer used the word "old" had to have some significance. Many of the maps made in the mid-1800s did not show it; it took a modern-day book to point the way. On page 39 of LONDON FROM THE EARLIEST TIMES TO THE PRESENT DAY by John Hayes, Ratcliffe Highway is seen to begin at the Tower of London, to proceed eastward and inland, and to rejoin the river on the west side of Regent's Dock Basin. (On the east side of the Basin is Limehouse.)

Today's maps show this course to begin as Tower Hill, becoming East Smithfield and finishing up as The Highway. A little to the west of the point where The Highway meets the riverfront, two squares to the north, is Shadwell Street and beyond that, at an equal distance, is Commercial Road. In this general area was John Ki's gambling house, the Joy-Shop, "down Shadwell way." This could have been north of old Ratcliffe Highway since the rear of the building was located on an old cutting. These cuttings were numerous, some dating from ancient times, when London was Llyn-din, a Celtic lake-fort on a vast lagoon.

It is my opinion that Shen-Yan's was located to the west of the Regent's Canal Dock cutting off Ratcliffe Highway, and that Limehouse Police Station was nearby. When Shen-Yan fled to Limehouse, his suspected hide-out was believed to be between Three Colt and Gill Streets, which run north of the Limehouse Causeway. The cross-streets involved would have been Bate and Grenade Sts. It is possible that Petrie flashed his light to the police cutter lying-to on the Surrey side of the river from Limehouse Pier, by coming down Thames Place or Phoebe Street. However, I got

the impression that this occurred to the west and that the white peacock was found on Limehouse Pier or a wharf adjacent to it.

The Wapping River Police Station is no problem, since it is located on the river east of London Dock; the River Police Station along Ratcliffe Highway could have been the Limehouse Police Station.

There is also no problem in locating the place where Cadby's body was recovered: Commercial Dock Pier is located on the Surrey side of the river, midway along Limehouse Reach. In a southwest direction from this part of the river, we find Brixton and Cold Harbour Lane, "near the Brixton Police Station," where Cadby had his living quarters.

With reference to the case that Mason was investigating "down St. George's way," there are no thoroughfares with this name near enough to the river or important enough to be considered other than St. George's Way on the south side of the Surrey Canal, south of Surrey Commercial Docks. *[The fact that "way" is not capitalized may be significant. A more modern name for part of the Ratcliffe Highway is St. George's Street; the latter name was in use in 1912, according to Baedeker's Guide to London for that year, and may have been applied to the neighboring area in addition to the street itself. With this interpretation, "down St. George's way" would refer to the region directly north of the London Docks and north of Ratcliffe Highway. -Ed.]*

Tilbury, where the body of the dacoit was discovered, is at the approach to the Thames Estuary across from Gravesend. It is chiefly noted as the point of departure for the Orient and Australia on ships of the Pacific and Oriental Navigation Co.

I came across an interesting reference to Limehouse in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* relating to the origin of its name. That area was once noted as a source of lime, which was used in ovens or oasts: hence the name Lime Oast, which became Limehouse.

On pages 154-5 of IN SEARCH OF LONDON by H. V. Morton, it is stated that the Limehouse of pre-World War II days was noted for the fan-tan establishments frequented by the Chinese, and located on the ground floors of buildings along Pennyfields. Although these places were poorly furnished, the upper floors were often richly and palatially endowed for the English wives of many Chinese. In a fashion, this bears out Rohmer's speculations occasioned by his brief encounter with the real-life counterpart of Fu Manchu.

In the same book, it is reported that a visitor to Limehouse after World War II, on noticing the absence of the Chinese, was told that they had all gone to Liverpool...

THE ROHMER REVIEW No. 5 August 1970

Contents

Were Houdini's Feats Supernatural?
by Sax Rohmer . . . . . 1
Sax Rohmer and the Art of Making Villains
by Anice Page Cooper . . . 8
Limehouse and the River Police
by John E. Carroll . . . . 13
(Map by John E. Carroll, pp. 16-17)
The Zagazig Code by Evelyn Herzog . . . . . 22
Zagazig Revisited by Julian L. Biggers . . . 25
Dantean Allusions in THE TRAIL OF FU MANCHU
by J. R. Christopher . . . 27
Fleet Street Report by Andrew Jay Peck and the Editor . . . . Inside Front Cover
Letters to Limehouse by Elizabeth Sax Rohmer and John E. Carroll . . . . 31
From the Editor . . . . . 9

*The Rohmer Review* is edited and published for The Sax Rohmer Society by

Robert E. Briney
233 Lafayette St., Apt. #2
Salem, Massachusetts 01970.

(After November 1, the street address will be: 245 Lafayette St., Apt. 3F.)

Contributing editors: Douglas A. Rossman, Andrew Jay Peck, Luther Norris, Chris Steinbrunner, David Braveman.

Subscriptions for the 1970-71 biennium (issues #5-7) are $2.00. Back issues #3-4 are available @ 50¢ each. Please address all communications, and make checks and money orders payable, to the editor, *not* to The Sax Rohmer Society or to *The Rohmer Review*.

Copyright 1970 by R. E. Briney